World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 728 recorded 12 November 1998

GUEST: **Peter Hansen**
Commissioner-General
UNRWA

JOURNALISTS: John Metzler, USA Radio Network
Barbara Crossette, The New York Times

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

PALESTINE REFUGEES

The Palestine Refugees, who marked five decades of exile in 1998, continue to face declining standards of living and an increasingly tense regional environment and still rely on UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The Agency meets fundamental needs -- education for children and young people, basic health care, support for the disadvantaged and opportunities for self-betterment. UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen talks about the work of UNRWA for the 3.5 million Palestinian Refugees.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:00"
Executive Producer:	Chaim Litewski
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Corazon A. Icasas

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, provides education, health care, relief assistance and social services to three and a half million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With the Middle East peace process at a critical juncture, what can the Palestinian refugees expect? Will they finally be able to go home?

Our guest today is the UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen. Joining me to talk with Mr. Hansen are John Metzler of *USA Radio Network* and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*.

Mr. Hansen, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

HANSEN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Commissioner-General there has been a bit of an improvement it seems in the peace process, thanks very largely to the very energetic intervention of President Clinton. What effect is this likely to have on UNRWA's operations? Are things going to be easier for you and what about the reaction of the Palestinians that you care for?

HANSEN: Well the Wye Agreement is to be welcomed and one must hope that it will continue to evolve and bring the parties closer together. If it does so, and that will take a lot of courage from both sides in the equation, if it does so the refugees can hope to have their issue brought on the agenda because it hasn't really been yet. The refugee issue is one of the final status issues and it is really now only being taken up for negotiations when we enter into that phase. It's not going to be something that is going to make a difference in the next three or four months for the lives of the refugees. They have been waiting for 50 years to see their dream of returning realized. It is expressed in UN Resolution 194, and more Palestinian children can quote from Resolution 194 than Danish children, where I come from, can quote from our constitution I'm sure. But on the other

hand the Israelis have made it quite clear that there is not going to be a general return of UNRWA refugees so this is going to be some very difficult and very sensitive negotiations.

LITTLEJOHNS: You're in daily contact with the Palestinians was there would you say a wave, an upsurge of optimism because of the Wye Agreement.

HANSEN: Well, there were many who were optimistic and I wish that the future would prove that everybody should have been pessimistic. But there were quite frankly, if we look at it realistically and honestly, also many who greeted it with a certain degree of apathy and feeling that we have seen such movements ahead before only to see it returned back. Now I hope that this is not going to be the case this time but one can really not blame those seeking peace from both sides sometimes to be a bit weary of the staying power of the process we have sometimes seen these breakthroughs.

LITTLELEJOHNS: What are the agency's relations like with Israel, the Government of Israel?

HANSEN: We enjoy good, practical, cordial relationships with Israel as we should with everybody we cooperate with and as we must, since we are operating in and out of territories that are still occupied and where we have to pass through check points, where we have to get our staff to work, which is often very difficult if they are not given allowance to go through. When we have closures we have constant problems so I tell my Israeli interlocutors that they should never expect me not to complain to them, but we complain in a civilized manner and we have had some cooperation several times in having problems solved in goodwill and good faith.

METZLER: Of the three and a half million people that UNRWA deals with I notice the term "registered refugee" is often used in the various publications. Now is this to say that everybody who is a Palestinian is considered *de jure* a refugee or registered refugee? Is there a certain implicit criteria that one must pass through for certain benefits? What is the criteria that UNRWA has for a refugee?

HANSEN: The criteria for being a registered UNRWA refugee is that you can prove residence in mandate Palestine, present day Israel, for two years prior to 1948. These people and their descendants are registered refugees with UNRWA. In 1948 there

were about 700,000. Today there are, as Michael Littlejohns and yourself alluded to, three and a half million. So obviously this is not a problem that is becoming easier to solve as time passes and the number of refugees increases.

METZLER: So in other words one then looks and say "well if somebody is living in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, he is a refugee but at the same time can he not be a *de jure* resident of Jordan?

HANSEN: Jordan has been quite exceptional in granting citizenship rights to the refugees and I'm glad you mentioned Jordan because there are actually more refugees in Jordan than there are in Gaza and the West Bank put together – something people often tend to forget. But Jordan has been a country that has been very, very welcoming to the refugees and have been sharing with the refugees a great deal despite their own limited means.

CROSSETTE: But when you talk to them, when you teach them, when you create text books and so on, how do you deal with this question of...in fact what is home? I mean, there are two elements to it. For these many years there must be at least a generation or two young people, obviously children born and raised and having children of their own and maybe grandchildren who really have known no other kind of life. Is there, for example in the case of Jordan, any effort to try to make them think at least of the options, like would it be better to remain as a Jordanian citizen because in that country they do have this option or other ways to suggest some pre-planning so that when the moment comes there won't be a lot of, perhaps, broken hearts and maybe a lot of tension about where they will return to?

HANSEN: First of all, we don't write text books because we have to use the curriculum of the Jordanians and the Egyptians in Gaza and the Syrians and the Lebanese, so we are not really in control of that. But it's nevertheless a very good question that gets to the heart of the matter. If you ask such a child whose grandfather or maybe great-grandfather arrived as a refugee and you would ask such a child "where do you come from", and you ask them in a camp in Gaza or wherever they might be in a camp in Jordan, they will say "I come from Jaffa or I come from Haifa or I come from Be'er Sheva".

They identify so closely with their homeland. There is an attachment to land, landscape, houses, olive groves in that part of the world that we don't really know to the same degree in our own pack and go to the next city or state culture of the United States or, more increasingly, also Europe. But it is a very difficult question to open because if you start entertaining the thought that I will not go home, then you give up before it has even been discussed what you consider is your inalienable, sacred right to return to home. So it's a very tricky issue where you can't really find a solution to it before you have – or you cannot start defining it before you found a solution to it because it talks about such basic yearnings and hopes that it's extremely sensitive to these people.

CROSSETTE: What kind of cultural lives do these people lead and how do they keep perhaps even regional cultures alive among children? What's the situation? I know I've heard complaints that over the years Israelis have done a lot to try to dampen down writers, in fact arresting them and so on, and I guess this goes on even among the Palestinians themselves. How does one keep a vibrant culture alive in an environment like this where there are so many basic needs to be met, and as you can see from these reports also, some cut-backs on education?

HANSEN: Yes, that's real serious what we are facing by way of cut-backs but it is really amazing to see how the Palestinians are clinging to their culture, how vibrant their literary life is, how vibrant the artistic life, paintings, sculptures. And one thing that has struck me is the degree to which women have insisted on continuing to do traditional Palestinian embroidery. I mean this is a particular art form that goes back where you have a different pattern from every village and these are things that perhaps are not up to the 20th century advance vocational training issues but which, nevertheless, are very important to keep that identity with your past, with your village, with your people. That is very important.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Commissioner-General, tell us a bit about the funding of UNRWA. I presume that the funding is voluntary.

HANSEN: The funding is voluntary.

LITTLEJOHNS: And where is it coming from?

HANSEN: It is coming from basically North America and Europe. The United States covers about 25% of our budget. The European Union and the Member States cover a good deal more than that when you take individual countries and add them up and put the European Union on top. I have also exerted efforts, with the good help of the Arab League, to have the Arab countries contribute more than they do now and indeed, we have tried to make it a truly universal issue, as it is politically, also to make it financially so that we can avoid the constant, frustrating, financial crisis we are living through. This year we are facing a deficit of 62 million dollars that are translated into service reductions and it is very important to understand that services are very important. The Palestinians care about their education as much as any people in the world. They care, of course, also about their health and their relative social well-being, but UNRWA is not only services to them UNRWA is the UN agency that to them represents their existence. We are the embodiment of the international community's recognition that there is a problem and a problem that there has to be something done with. And when the refugees see that we reduced our services they feel not only are the services reduced but this is really about reducing the commitment to them and thereby reducing the problem of their future.

METZLER: Just a few days ago, returning to the issue of the funding, the European Union had made a statement saying that while Europe and in fact of course, the United States and Canada are playing yeoman role here in the funding, that other countries of the region, meaning I suppose the petro-dollar countries, should play a larger role and why don't many of those Arab countries play a larger role in helping the Palestinians?

HANSEN: Well, I have different ways of addressing that. What is the fair share that a country should pay to UNRWA? If we take the assumption that the only universally agreed burden-sharing criterion is the UN's scale of contributions, what if we apply the UN scale of contributions to UNRWA's budget, then we'll get the best indicator of who pulls their fair and full share. Now some Arab countries actually do. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait pay more to UNRWA than they would have if they had been assessed and the United Arab Emirates comes close. But we should not forget that this is not 1973 anymore and oil prices are not what they used to be. The combined gross national product of the Gulf

States is about that of Italy. So let us not imagine that we can have UNRWA paid for by the Arab States. The Arab States are also nervous. They don't need to be so nervous but they say that they are nervous about regionalizing the problem. If they pay a greater share they say that the rest of the international community will pay a lower share and they therefore don't take the full responsibility that they should take.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is UNRWA's Commissioner-General, Peter Hansen. I'm sorry, you were going to say a little more.

HANSEN: I was going to say that there are countries who do a great deal more than their fair share. Norway pays about seven times as much as they should have if they were assessed. Sweden pays about five times as much and Denmark about four times as much and the United States actually also pays their full, fair share - 25% is what their current share of the UN budget is. So there are a handful of countries that are pulling their full weight.

CROSSETTE: Your own freedom of movement, you talked a little bit about working in the situation you work, do you ever have any serious problems either with the Palestinian Authority now or with the Israelis that actually gets in the way of the work that you want to do? Has holding up permission to open the airport created any problems for you?

HANSEN: There are clearly problems of freedom of movement and that's what I'm always complaining about to the Israeli authorities. We don't have such problems with the Palestinian authority, we have other problems with them. It's not that there are not problems but we don't have freedom of movement problems, and they are really quite as serious. I do feel that Israel is beginning to make more of a strong effort to solve the concrete cases we have problems with but we still have a long way to go before I will be satisfied with that.

CROSSETTE: And you yourself?

HANSEN: I personally must confess to the fact that I get a fairly smooth ride through but sometimes I do come without telling who I am so I can feel on my own body how those who are not as privileged as I am can be treated at the points.

CROSSETTE: And your problems with the Palestinian Authority, and perhaps some mention of the relationship between the Palestinians of Gaza and the people who are strictly refugees, I mean the residents, the community.

HANSEN: In Gaza 75%, approximately of the population are registered refugees so it's the minority who are the original residents there. We have good working relationships with the Palestinian Authority as you would expect after all, what we have meant to the Palestinians over the years, but we sometimes suffer from some of the short-comings of the Palestinian Authority. For instance, about recovering money that they owe us which can be painful when we are short of cash.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is the Palestinian Authority relieving you of some of your responsibilities as an agency?

HANSEN: No, and they would not want to either. Because if the Palestinian Authority was relieving UNRWA of some of its responsibilities it would mean that they would be taking over a number of the international responsibilities and thus reduce the international case for the international involvement. We are not sitting imperialistically on our health clinics and schools and so on. We would not mind to hand over certain things to the Palestinian Authority but we fully understand why the Palestinian Authority says "thanks but no thanks" to that.

METZLER: Mr. Hansen, on the issue of schools, you are running an organization of more than half a million children in primary and secondary schools, what about higher education? You, as a former university professor I am sure, can address that issue. I know there is Bethlehem University which I think is sponsored by the Catholic church but what other higher educational opportunities are there for Palestinian resident refugees in the region?

HANSEN: Well, UNRWA started the first vocational training school in the Middle East and started the first resident vocational school for women in the entire Middle East where we could begin giving women an education that was not traditional in society and this has been extremely important. Thousands of students have graduated with skills as pharmaceutical technicians, as teachers and now as computer literate experts and that is

very important to give the Palestinian youth a passport to employment and self-reliance eventually. Many of the Palestinians who helped build up institutional structures in the Gulf countries were graduates of the UNRWA institutions. We do not run universities and, unfortunately, because of our financial woes, one of the things I with a very heavy heart have had to cut out of our programme has been scholarships for university training of Palestinian, very gifted graduates.

METZLER: What about teachers' colleges?

HANSEN: Teachers' colleges is part of our vocational training centres so virtually all of the teachers, all of the 12,000, 13,000 teachers we have in the organizations had been trained, had been getting their teacher qualifications through UNRWA institutions.

CROSSETTE: But what have been the sort of pluses and minuses in the move of your whole Headquarters to Gaza from Europe?

HANSEN: We moved from Vienna to Gaza and I think that this is the first time – no I don't think it is the first time – that a UN agency has moved from a cushy, first-world town, city, to a hardship third-world place like Gaza. And believe me it has not been easy and it's not something that I would wish to do again with many, many staff who felt very, very unhappy about moving to Gaza which is a non-family duty station and which means that many of them had to leave their families and children behind. That has not been easy at all, but we have survived and we have actually had no breakdowns in our systems or in our operations which one could have feared going through such a rather dramatic move as it was.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen you mentioned earlier that there was a certain apathy on the part of the Palestinians in reaction to the Wye Agreement. But there seems also to be a fair amount of unrest in the area under your authority. Tell us how serious the unrest has been and how you have coped with it.

HANSEN: Well, first of all, I think that there are basically, if we simplify it, three types of reactions to Wye. There are those who have been really encouraged by this break in the deadlock we have had and who will be very positive about it. Then we have

many who feel that too much has been given up from the Palestinian side and they would be reacting quite violently as we have seen against it in protest of what the Palestinians have had to compromise. And then you have the middle, the sort of deja vu all over again reaction, let's hope we will proceed but let's not make too sure that we won't be disappointed again.

CROSSETTE: It's interesting ...between the lines that are not actually in the report the sense that the combination of cut-backs because of budgetary problems and uncertainty about the peace process, and there may even too much hope for example of going home, but in fact there does seem to be the potential for creating more tension. Sometimes there are misunderstandings as you point out when you have to cut something back people can misinterpret this as meaning that somehow you are winding down your programme; that there is an uncertainty about the future. Does this also leave ground for the wrong kind of recruiting and protesting among the refugees? Does it worry you that there will be young people, for example, out of jobs or out of schools in larger numbers?

HANSEN: That's a continuous worry. We have unemployment rates of up to 40% in parts of the areas we serve. We have youths for whom there is virtually no hope and if we cannot help provide that hope by helping them to have a better future, at least a hope for a better future, they can turn to violent ways of dealing with their frustration. One thing that strikes me living there is that you have as little of that as you have because conditions are really awful in many of these camps and hopeless. And it is something I try to bring across to our donors. Do you really want to risk the stability of this region for lack of sums of money in the tens or millions of dollars? I cannot guarantee stability in the region through UNRWA programmes, but I can guarantee that if there is a further significant drop we really run the risk of political instability that will take away whatever public support that the peace process would have to enjoy to move forward.

METZLER: Returning to the cut backs Commissioner, nobody of course wants to be a refugee but in many of these cases isn't it also fair to say that the people can do more to help themselves - income generating programmes that your agency is addressing. What about creating more wealth amongst the community rather than looking to the outside in

supporting them?

HANSEN: It's very difficult to talk about the generating of wealth in the community when as in Lebanon the refugees are not allowed to work in most professions, when as in Gaza you cannot freely import and export and then create a basis for a living, economic identity. There is a notion, a stereotype in the West, primarily of the refugees, as sitting passively stretching out their hands expecting the international community to provide for them. The reality is often very different. Most of the alleyways that you will see paved in the camps has been done by the camp labourers themselves , on their own time, on their own resources. We sometimes give them a little cement or a little asphalt. If you look at our women activity centres you will see how the handicapped children, mentally or physically, are being cared for by volunteer women in the community who do it without pay. There are really so many striking examples of how the Palestinians are doing a great deal to help themselves under very, very difficult circumstances.

CROSSETTE: What are some of your successes, we have talked about all your problems. I understand that you've got a good health programme.

HANSEN: Well, I'm glad that you asked about that actually. One can become so preoccupied with the problems that you fail to see the lights that we can see. I will make the claim that one day I am sure that I can prove, with a little further policy analysis, that UNRWA probably has the most cost-effective, primary health system in the world. We have expenditures of about 11 dollars per capita, per refugee per year. In the region a country like Lebanon spends five times as much. A country like Israel, in the civil administration, pays about 12 or 13 times as much and UNRWA health programmes have as high outcomes in terms of disease reduction as any of the others have at a lower cost. That is something that we should look at with pride. Our education programme, our vocational training centres, have the highest scores in the countries where they operate and our schools have the highest scores on national exams compared to the nationals.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, we have less than a minute left. Let me ask you a question about the possibilities following the creation, if it happens, of a Palestine State. How would that affect UNRWA? Will you go out of business?

HANSEN: UNRWA would. When a State is formed, it will be able to at that time, transfer a number of its functions I suppose to the newly formed States. But not all of the Palestinian refugees would necessarily be able to return to that State. We are talking about three and a half million people in addition to those who are already residents there and there will be many, very thorny, difficult questions before that is sorted out. What will happen to the refugees in Syria, in Lebanon and in Jordan? But hopefully we will move rapidly in that direction.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, that's all the time that we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been the UNRWA Commissioner-General, Peter Hansen. He was interviewed by John Metzler of *USA Radio Network,* and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times.* I'm Michael Littlejohns, thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**